PAUL DE MAN

Shelley Disfigured: "The Triumph of Life"

Like several of the English romantics' major works The Triumph of Life, Shelley's last poem, is, as is well-known, a fragment that has been unearthed, edited, reconstructed, and much discussed. All this archeological labor can be considered a response to the questions that articulate one of the text's main structures: ". . . 'And what is this? / Whose shape is that within the car? and why—' " (177-78); later repeated in a more subject-oriented, second-person mode: " 'Whence earnest thou? and whither goest thou? / How did thy course begin,' I said, 'and why?' " (296-97); finally repeated again, now in the first person: " 'Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—. . .' " (398). These questions can easily be referred back to the enigmatic text they punctuate and they are characteristic ot tne interpretive labor associated with romanticism. In the case of this movement, they acquire an edge of urgency which is often lacking when they are addressed to earlier periods, except when these periods are themselves mediated by the neo-hellenism, the neo-medievalism, or the neo-baroque of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. This is not surprising, since they are precisely the archeological questions that prompt us to deduce the present from the identification of the more or less immediately anterior past, as well as from the process that leads from then to now. Such an attitude coincides with the use of history as a way to new beginnings, as "digging in the grounds for the new foundations." Much is invested in these metaphors of architecture and of statuary on which seems to hinge our ability to inhabit the world. But if this curiosity about antecedents has produced admirable philological results and allowed, as in the case of The Triumph of Life, for the establishment of texts whose unreliability is at least controlled by more reliable means, the questions which triggered all this industry remain more than ever in suspense: What is the meaning of The Triumph of Life, of Shelley, and of romanticism? What shape does it have, how did its course begin and why? Perhaps the difficulty of the answers is prefigured in the asking of the questions. The status of all these where's and what's and how's and why's is at stake, as well as the system that links these interrogative pronouns, on the one hand, to questions of definition and of temporal situation and, on the other hand, to questions of shape and of figure. Such questions allow one to conclude that The Triumph of Life is a fragment of something

whole, or romanticism a fragment, or a moment, in a process that now includes us within its horizon. What relationship do we have to such a text that allows us to call it a fragment that we are then entitled to reconstruct, to identify, and implicitly to complete? This supposes, among other things, that Shelley or romanticism are themselves entities which, like a statue, can be broken into pieces, mutilated, or allegorized (to use Hardy's alternatives) after having been stiffened, frozen, erected, or whatever one wants to call the particular rigidity of statues. Is the status of a text like the status of a statue? Yeats, one of Shelley's closest readers and disciples, wrote a fine poem about history and form called The Statues, which it would be rewarding to read in conjunction with The Triumph of Life. But there are more economic ways to approach this text and to question the possibility of establishing a relationship to Shelley and to romanticism in general. After all, the link between the present and its antecedents is itself dramatized in the poem, most explicitly and at greatest length in the encounter between the narrator and the figure designated by the proper name Rousseau, who has himself much to say about his own predecessors.

The unearthed fragments of this fragment, the discarded earliei versions, disclose that the relationship between Shelley and Rousseau, or between Rousseau and his ancestors, underwent considerable changes as the composition of the poem progressed. Consider, for instance, the passage in which the poet, guided at this moment by Rousseau, passes judgment upon his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, including the openly alluded to Wordsworth, with such vehemence that he condemns them all to oblivion. He is reproached for this by Rousseau who intervenes to assert that he himself, as well as Voltaire, would have ascended to "the fane / Where truth and its inventors sit enshrined," if they had not been so faint-hearted as to lack faith in their own intellectual labor as well as, by implication, that of their ancestors. Those encrypted statues of Truth are identified as "Plato and his pupil" (presumably Aristotle) who "Reigned from the center to the circumference" and prepared the way for Bacon and modern science. Rousseau's and Voltaire's capitulation is not a sheer loss however, since Rousseau has gained insight that he is able to communicate in turn to the young Shelley. Donald Reiman, the editor of The Triumph of Life, glosses the passage as follows:

Rousseau . . . tries to impress on the Poet that it was exactly this attitude toward the past struggle of great men that led him and Voltaire to abandon their reforming zeal and succumb to life. Thus the poet's contemptuous allusion to Wordsworth turns against him as Rousseau endeavors to show the Poet how the mistakes of those who have preceded him, especially idealists like himself, can serve as a warning to him: Rousseau and Voltaire fell because they adopted the contemptuous attitude toward history that the poet now displays; the child is father of the man, and Shelley's generation, representing the full mastery of the age that dawned in the French Revolution, can learn from the mistakes of that age's earlier generations (those of Rousseau and Voltaire and of Wordsworth).

Although this is certainly not presented as an interpretation of the entire text, but only of this discarded passage, it remains typical of the readings generally given of The Triumph of Life, even when they are a great deal more complicated than this

straightforward statement. It is a clear example of the recuperation of a failing energy by means of an increased awareness: Rousseau lacked power, but because he can consciously articulate the causes of his weakness in words, the energy is preserved and recovered in the following generation. And this reconversion extends back to its originators, since the elders, at first condemned, are now reinstated in the name of their negative but exemplary knowledge. The child is father of the man, just as Wordsworth lucidly said, both humbling and saving himself in the eyes of his followers. This simple motion can take on considerable dialectical intricacy without altering its fundamental scheme. The entire debate as to whether The Triumph of Life represents or heralds a movement of growth or of degradation is part of this same genetic and historical metaphor. The unquestioned authority of this metaphor is much more important than the positive or negative valorization of the movement it generates.

The initial situation of Rousseau—allied with Voltaire and Wordsworth in a shared failure, as opposed to Plato, Aristotle, and Bacon, and as opposed, by implication, to Shelley himself—changes in later versions. In the last available text, itself frozen into place by Shelley's accidental death, the hierarchy is quite different: Rousseau is now set apart quite sharply from the representatives of the Enlightenment (which include Voltaire next to Kant and Frederick the Great) who are condemned with some of the original severity, without Rousseau reproving him for it. No allusion to Wordsworth is included at this point, though Wordsworth is certainly present in other regions of the poem. Rousseau is now classified with Plato and Aristotle, but whereas these philosophers were held up as untarnished images of Truth in the earlier version, they are now fallen and, in the imagery of the poem, chained to the chariot of Life, together with "the great bards of old" (1. 247). The reasons for their fall, as well as the elements in their works and in their lives that both unite and distinguish them from Rousseau, are developed in passages that are not difficult to interpret from a thematic point of view. The resulting hierarchies have become more complex: we first have a class of entirely condemned historical personages, which includes representatives of the Enlightenment as well as the emperors and popes of Christianity (281 ff.); on a distinctly higher level, but nevertheless defeated, we find Rousseau, Plato, Aristotle, and Homer. As possibly exonerated from this defeat, the poem mentions only Bacon, a remnant from the earlier passage who now has lost much of his function, as well as "the sacred few" (128) who, unlike Adonais in the earlier poem, had no earthly destiny whatsoever, either because, by choice or destiny, they died too early or because, like Christ or Socrates, they are mere fictions in the writings of others. As for Shelley himself, his close proximity to Rousseau is now more strongly marked than in the earlier passage; the possibility of his escape from Rousseau's destiny has now become problematic and depends on one's reading of Rousseau's own story, which constitutes the main narrative sequence of the poem. Lengthy and complex as it is, Rousseau's self-narrated history provides no answer to his true identity, although he is himself shown in quest of such an answer. Questions of origin, of direction, and of identity punctuate the text without ever receiving a clear answer. They always lead back to a new scene of questioning which merely repeats the quest and recedes in infinite regress: the narrator asks himself " 'And what

is this? . . .' " (177) and receives an enigmatic answer (" 'Life!' ") from an enigmatic shape; once identified as Rousseau, the shape can indeed reveal some other names in the pageant of history but is soon asked, by the poet, to identify itself in a deeper sense than by a mere name: " 'How did thy course begin . . . and why?' " Complying with this request, Rousseau narrates the history of his existence, also culminating in an encounter with a mysterious entity, " 'A shape all light . . .' " (352) to whom, in his turn, he puts the question " 'whence I came, and where I am, and why—.' " As an answer, he is granted a vision of the same spectacle that prompted the poet-narrator's questioning in the first place; we have to imagine the same sequence of events repeating themselves for Shelley, for Rousseau, and for whomever Rousseau chose to question in his turn as Shelley questioned him. The structure of the text is not one of question and answer, but of a question whose meaning, as question, is effaced from the moment it is asked. The answer to the question is another question, asking what and why one asked, and thus receding ever further from the original query. This movement of effacing and of forgetting becomes prominent in the text and dispels any illusion of dialectical progress or regress. The articulation in terms of the questions is displaced by a very differently structured process that pervades all levels of the narrative and that repeats itself in the main sequences as well as in what seem to be lateral episodes. It finally engulfs and dissolves what started out to be, like Alastor, Epipsychidion, or even Prometheus Unbound, a quest (or, like Adonais, an elegy), to replace it by something quite different for which we have no name readily available among the familiar props of literary history.

Whenever this self-receding scene occurs, the syntax and the imagery of the poem tie themselves into a knot which arrests the process of understanding. The resistance of these passages is such that the reader soon forgets the dramatic situation and is left with only these unresolved riddles to haunt him: the text becomes the successive and cumulative experience of these tangles of meaning and of figuration. One of these tangles occurs near the end of Rousseau's narration of his encounter with the "shape all light" assumed to possess the key to his destiny.

". . . as one between desire and shame Suspended, I said . ..
'Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—
Pass not away upon the passing stream.'

" 'Arise and quench thy thirst' " was her reply.
And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand
Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,

"I rose; and bending at her sweet command,
Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
And suddenly my brain became as sand

"Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador,
Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed

"Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore
Until the second bursts—so on my sight
Burst a new Vision never seen before.
(394-410)

The scene dramatizes the failure to satisfy a desire for self-knowledge and can therefore indeed be considered as something of a key passage. Rousseau is not given a satisfactory answer, for the ensuing vision is a vision of continued delusion that includes him. He undergoes instead a metamorphosis in which his brain, the center of his consciousness, is transformed. The transformation is also said to be the erasure of an imprinted track, a passive, mechanical operation that is no longer within the brain's own control: both the production and the erasure of the track are not an act performed by the brain, but the brain being acted upon by something else. The resulting "sand" is not, as some commentators imply, an image of drought and sterility (this is no desert, but a shore washed by abundant waters). "My brain became as sand" suggests the modification of a knowledge into the surface on which this knowledge ought to be recorded. Ought to be, for instead of being clearly imprinted it is "more than half erased" and covered over. The process is a replacement, a substitution, continuing the substitution of "brain" by "sand," of one kind of track, said to be like that of a deer, by another, said to be like that of a wolf "from which [the deer] fled amazed." They mark a stage in the metamorphosis of Rousseau into his present state or shape; when we first meet him, he is

. . . what I thought was an old root which grew
To strange distortion out of the hill side . . .

And . . . the grass which methought hung so wide
And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
And . . . the holes he vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes.
(182-88)

The erasure or effacement is indeed the loss of a face, in French figure. Rousseau no longer, or hardly (as the tracks are not all gone, but more than half erased), has a face. Like the protagonist in the Hardy story, he is disfigured, defigure, defaced. And also as in the Hardy story, to be disfigured means primarily the loss of the eyes, turned to "stony orbs" or to empty holes. This trajectory from erased self-knowledge to disfiguration is the trajectory of The Triumph of Life.

The connotations of the pair deer/wolf, marking a change in the inscriptions made upon Rousseau's mind, go some way in explaining the presence of Rousseau in the poem, a choice that has puzzled several interpreters. The first and obvious contrast is between a gentle and idyllic peace pursued by violent aggression. Shelley, an assiduous reader of Rousseau at a time when he was being read more closely than he has been since, evokes an ambivalence of structure and of mood that is indeed

specifically Rousseau's rather than anyone else's, including Wordsworth's. Rousseau's work is characterized in part by an introspective, self-reflexive mode, which uses literary models of Augustinian and pietistic origin, illustrated, for instance, by such literary allusions as Petrarch and the Astree and, in general, by the elements that prompted Schiller to discuss him under the heading of the contemporary idyll. But to this are juxtaposed elements that are closer to Machiavelli than to Petrarch, concerned with political power as well as with economic and legal realities. The first register is one of delicacy of feeling, whereas a curious brand of cunning and violence pervades the other. The uneasy mixture is both a commonplace and a crux of Rousseau interpretation. It appears in the larger as well as the finer dimensions of his writings, most obviously in such broad contrasts as separate the tone and import of a text such as The Social Contract from that of Julie. That the compatibility between inner states of consciousness and acts of power is a thematic concern of The Triumph of Life is clear from the political passages in the poem. In the wake of the in itself banal passage on Bonaparte, the conflict is openly stated:

. . . much I grieved to think how power and will
In opposition rule our mortal day—

And why God made irreconcilable
Good and the means of good; ...
(228-31)

Rousseau is unique among Shelley's predecessors not only in that this question of the discrepancy between the power of words as acts and their power to produce other words is inscribed within the thematics and the structure of his writings, but also in the particular form that it takes there. For the tension passes, in Rousseau, through a self which is itself experienced as a complex interplay between drives and the conscious reflection on these drives; Shelley's understanding of this configuration is apparent in this description of Rousseau as "between desire and shame / Suspended. ..."

The opposition between will and power, the intellectual goal and the practical means, reappears when it is said, by and of Rousseau, that ". . . my words were seeds of misery—/ Even as the deeds of others ..." (280-81). The divergence between words and deeds (by way of "seeds") seems to be suspended in Rousseau's work, albeit at the cost of, or rather because of, considerable suffering: "I / Am one of those who have created, even / If it be but a world of agony" (293-95). For what sets Rousseau apart from the representatives of the Enlightenment is the pathos of what is here called the "heart" ("I was overcome / By my own heart alone. . . ."). The contrast between the cold and skeptical Voltaire and the sensitive Rousseau is another commonplace of popular intellectual history. But Shelley's intuition of the "heart" in Rousseau is more than merely sentimental. Its impact becomes clearer in the contrast that sets Rousseau apart from "the great bards of old," Homer and Vergil, said to have ". . . inly quelled / The passions which they sung . . ." (274-75), whereas Rousseau has ". . . suffered what [he] wrote, or viler pain!" Unlike the epic narrators who wrote

about events in which they did not take part, Rousseau speaks out of his own self-knowledge, not only in his Confessions (which Shelley did not like) but in all his works, regardless of whether they are fictions or political treatises. In the tradition of Augustine, Descartes, and Malebranche, the self is for him not merely the seat of the affections but the primary center of cognition. Shelley is certainly not alone in thus characterizing and praising Rousseau, but the configuration between self, heart, and action is given even wider significance when Rousseau compares himself to the Greek philosophers. Aristotle turns out to be, like Rousseau, a double structure held together by the connivance of words and deeds; if he is now enslaved to the eroding process of "life," it is because he does not exist singly, as pure mind, but cannot be separated from the "woes and wars" his pupil Alexander the Great inflicted upon the world. Words cannot be isolated from the deeds they perform; the tutor necessarily performs the deeds his pupil derives from his mastery. And just as "deeds" cause the undoing of Aristotle, it is the "heart" that brought down Plato who, like Rousseau, was a theoretician oi statecraft and a legislator. Like Aristotle and like Rousseau (who is like a deer but also like a wolf) Plato is at least double; life "conquered [his] heart" as Rousseau was "overcome by [his] own heart alone." The reference to the apocryphal story of Aster makes clear that "heart" here means more than mere affectivity; Plato's heart was conquered by "love" and, in this context, love is like the intellectual eros that links Socrates to his pupils. Rousseau is placed within a configuration, brought about by "words," of knowledge, action, and erotic desire. The elements are present in the symbolic scene from which we started out, since the pursuit of the deer by the wolf, in this context of Ovidian and Dantesque metamorphoses, is bound to suggest Apollo's pursuit of the nymphs as well as scenes of inscription and effacement.

The scene is one of violence and grief, and the distress reappears in the historical description of Rousseau with its repeated emphasis on suffering and agony, as well as in the dramatic action of defeat and enslavement. But this defeat is paradoxical: in a sense, Rousseau has overcome the discrepancy of action and intention that tears apart the historical world, and he has done so because his words have acquired the power of actions as well as of the will. Not only because they represent or reflect on actions but because they themselves, literally, are actions. Their power to act exists independently of their power to know: Aristotle's or Plato's mastery of mind did not give them any control over the deeds of the world, also and especially the deeds that ensured as a consequence of their words and with which they were directly involved. The power that arms their words also makes them lose their power over them. Rousseau gains shape, face, or figure only to lose it as he acquires it. The enigma of this power, the burden of whatever understanding Shelley's poem permits, depends primarily on the reading of Rousseau's recapitulative narrative of his encounter with the "Shape all light" (308-433).

Rousseau's history, as he looks back upon his existence from the "April prime" of his young years to the present, tells of a specific experience that is certainly not a simple one but that can be designated by a single verb: the experience is that of forgetting. The term appears literally (1. 318) and in various periphrases (such as "oblivious spell," 331), or in metaphors with a clear analogical vehicle such as "quell" (329),

"blot [from memory]" (330), "trample" (388), "tread out" (390), "erase" (406), etc. It combines with another, more familiar metaphorical strain that is present throughout the entire poem: images of rising and waning light and of the sun.

The structure of "forgetting," in this text, is not clarified by echoes of a Platonic recollection and recognition (anamnesis) that enter the poem, partly by way of Shelley's own Platonic and Neoplatonic readings, partly by way of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode whose manifest presence, in this part of the poem, has misled even the most attentive readers of The Triumph of Life. In the Phaedo (73) and, with qualifications too numerous to develop here, in Wordsworth's Ode, what one forgets is a former state which Yeats, who used the same set of emblems, compares to the Unity of Being evoked in Aristophanes' Symposium speech as the mainspring of erotic desire. Within a Neoplatonic Christian tradition, this easily be-comes a fitting symbol for the Incarnation, for a birth out of a transcendental realm into a finite world. But this is precisely what the experience of forgetting, in The Triumph of Life, is not. What one forgets here is not some previous condition, for the line of demarcation between the two conditions is so unclear, the distinction between the forgotten and the remembered so unlike the distinction between two well-defined areas, that we have no assurance whatever that the forgotten ever existed:

"Whether my life had been before that sleep
The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell

Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep
I know not."

(332-35)

The polarities of waking and sleeping (or remembering and forgetting) are curiously scrambled, in this passage, with those of past and present, of the imagined and the real, of knowing and not knowing. For if, as is clear from the previous scene, to be born into life is to fall asleep, thus associating life with sleep, then to "wake" from an earlier condition of non-sleeping into "this harsh world" of life can only be to become aware of one's persistent condition of slumber, to be more than ever asleep, a deeper sleep replacing a lighter one, a deeper forgetting being achieved by an act of memory which remembers one's forgetting. And since Heaven and Hell are not here two transcendental realms but the mere opposition between the imagined and the real, what we do not know is whether we are awake or asleep, dead or alive, forgetting or remembering. We cannot tell the difference between sameness and difference, and this inability to know takes on the form of a pseudoknowledge which is called a forgetting. Not just because it is an unbearable condition of indetermination which has to be repressed, but because the condition itself, regardless of how it affects us,

necessarily hovers between a state of knowing and not-knowing, like the symptom of a disease which recurs at the precise moment that one remembers its absence. What is forgotten is absent in the mode of a possible delusion, which is another way of saying that it does not fit within a symmetrical structure of presence and absence.
In conformity with the consistent system of sun imagery, this hovering motion is evoked throughout the poem by scenes of glimmering light. This very "glimmer" unites the poet-narrator to Rousseau, as the movement of the opening sunrise is repeated in Rousseau's encounter with the feminine shape, just as it unites the theme of forgetting with the motions of the light. The verb appears in the opening scene:

... a strange trance over my fancy grew
Which was not slumber, for the shade it spread

Was so transparent that the scene came through
As clear as when a veil of light is drawn
O'er the evening hills they glimmer; . . .

(29-33, emphasis added)
and then again, later on, now with Rousseau on stage:

The presence of that shape which on the stream
Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,

More dimly than a day appearing dream,
The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep,
A light from Heaven whose half extinguished beam

Through the sick day in which we wake to weep
Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost.
So did that shape its obscure tenour keep. . . .

(425-32, emphasis added)
It is impossible to say, in either passage, how the polarities of light and dark are matched with those of waking and sleep; the confusion is the same as in the previously quoted passage on forgetting and remembering. The light, in the second passage, is said to be like a dream, or like sleep ("the ghost of a forgotten form of sleep"), yet it shines, however distantly, upon a condition which is one of awakening ("the sad day in which we wake to weep"); in this light, to be awake is to be as if one were asleep. In the first passage, it is explicitly stated that since the poet perceives so clearly, he cannot be asleep, but the clarity is then said to be like that of a veil drawn over a darkening surface, a description which necessarily connotes covering and hiding, even if the veil is said to be "of light." Light covers light, trance covers slumber and creates conditions of optical confusion that resemble nothing as much as the experience of trying to read The Triumph of Life, as its meaning glimmers, hovers, and wavers, but refuses to yield the clarity it keeps announcing.

This play of veiling and unveiling is, of course, altogether tantaliz
ing. Forgetting is a highly erotic experience; it is like glimmering light
because it cannot be decided whether it reveals or hides; it is like desire
because like the wolf pursuing the deer, it does violence to what sustains
it; it is like a trance or a dream because it is asleep to the very extent that
it is conscious and awake, and dead to the extent that it is alive. The
passage that concerns us makes this knot, by which knowledge, oblivion,
and desire hang suspended, into an articulated sequence of events that
demands interpretation. '

The chain that leads Rousseau from the birth of his consciousness to his present state of impending death passes through a well-marked succession of relays. Plato and Wordsworth provide the initial linking of birth with forgetting, but this forgetting has, in Shelley's poem, the glimmering ambivalence which makes it impossible to consider it as an act of closure or of beginning and which makes any further comparison with Wordsworth irrelevant. The metaphor for this process is that of "a gentle rivulet . . . [which] filled the grove / With sound which all who hear must needs forget / All pleasure and all pain . . ." (314-19). Unlike Yeats's, Shelley's river does not function as the "generated soul," as the descent of the transcendental soul into earthly time and space. As the passage develops, it enters into a system of relationships that are natural rather than esoteric. The property of the river that the poem singles out is its sound; the oblivious spell emanates from the repetitive rhythm of the water, which articulates a random noise into a definite pattern. Water, which has no shape of itself, is molded into shape by its contact with the earth, just as in the scene of the water washing away the tracks, it generates the very possibility of structure, pattern, form, or shape by way of the disappearance of shape into shapelessness. The repetition of the erasures rhythmically articulates what is in fact a disarticulation, and the poem seems to be shaped by the undoing of shapes. But since this pattern does not fully correspond to what it covers up, it leaves the trace which allows one to call this ambivalent shaping a forgetting. The birth of what an earlier Shelley poem such as Mont Blanc would still have called the mind occurs as the distortion which allows one to make the random regular by "forgetting" differences. As soon as the water's noise becomes articulated sound it can enter into contact with the light. The birth of form as the interference of light and water passes, in the semi-synaesthesia of the passage, through the mediation of sound; it is however only a semi-synaesthesia, for the optical and auditory perceptions, though simultaneous, nevertheless remain treated in asymmetrical opposition:

A shape all light, which with one hand did fling
Dew on the earth, as if she were the
Dawn Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing

A silver music on the mossy lawn,
And still before her on the dusky grass
Iris her many coloured scarf had drawn.

(352-57, emphasis added)
The water of the original river here fulfills a double and not necessarily complementary action, as it combines with the light to form, on the one hand, Iris's scarf or rainbow and, on the other hand, the "silver music" of oblivion. A traditional symbol of the integration of the phenomenal with the transcendental world, the natural synthesis of water and light in the rainbow is, in Shelley, the familiar "dome of many coloured glass" whose "stain" is the earthly trace and promise of an Eternity in which Adonais' soul is said to dwell "like a star." As such, it irradiates all the textures and forms of the natural world with the veil of the sun's farbiger Abglanz, just as it provides the analogical light and heat that will make it possible to refer to the poet's mind as "embers." The metaphorical chain which links the sun to water, to color, to heat, to nature, to mind, and to consciousness, is certainly at work in the poem and can be summarized in this image of the rainbow. But this symbol is said to exist here in the tenuous mode of insistence, as something that still prevails (356) despite the encroachment of something else, also emanating from water and sun and associated with them from the start, called music and forgetting. This something else, of which it could be said that it wrenches the final statement of Adonais into a different shape, appears in some degree of tension with the symbol of the rainbow. The entire scene of the shape's apparition and subsequent waning (412) is structured as a near-miraculous suspension between these two different forces whose interaction gives to the figure the hovering motion which may well be the mode of being of all figures. This glimmering figure takes on the form of the unreachable reflection of Narcissus, the manifestation of shape at the expense of its possession. The suspended fascination of the Narcissus stance is caught in the moment when the shape is said to move.

. . . with palms so tender
Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow, . . .

(361-62)

The scene is self-reflexive: the closure of the shape's contours is brought about by self-duplication. The light generates its own shape by means of a mirror, a surface that articulates it without setting up a clear separation that differentiates inside from outside as self is differentiated from other. The self that comes into being in the moment of reflection is, in spatial terms, optical symmetry as the ground of structure, optical repetition as the structural principle that engenders entities as shapes. "Shape all light" is referentially meaningless since light, the necessary condition for shape, is itself, like water, without shape, and acquires shape only when split in the illusion of a doubleness which is not that of self and other. The sun, in this text, is from the start the figure of this self-contained specularity. But the double of the sun can only be the eye conceived as the mirror of light. "Shape" and "mirror" are inseparable in this scene, just as the sun is inseparable from the shapes it generates and which are, in fact, the eye, and just as the sun is inseparable from itself since it produces the illusion of the self as shape. The sun can be said "to stand," a figure which assumes the existence of an entire spatial organization, because it stands personified

amid the blaze
Of his own glory, . . .

(349-50)

The sun "sees" its own light reflected, like Narcissus, in a well that is a mirror and also an eye:

. . . the Sun's image radiantly intense
Burned on the waters of the well that glowed
Like gold, . . .
(345-47)

Because the sun is itself a specular structure, the eye can be said to generate a world of natural forms. The otherness of a world that is in fact without order now becomes, for the eye, a maze made accessible to solar paths, as the eye turns from the blank radiance of the sun to its green and blue reflection in the world, and allows us to be in this world as in a landscape of roads and intents. The sun

threaded all the forest maze
With winding paths of emerald fire. . . .

(347-48)

The boldest, but also the most traditional, image in this passage is that of the sunray as a thread that stitches the texture of the world, the necessary and complementary background for the eye of Narcissus. The water and pupil of the eye generate the rainbow of natural forms along which it dwells in sensory self-fulfillment. The figure of the sun, present from the beginning of the poem, repeats itself in the figure of the eye's self-erotic contact with its own surface, which is also the mirror of the natural world. The erotic element is marked from the start, in the polarity of a male sun and a feminine shape, eye or well, which is said to

bend her
Head under the dark boughs, till like a willow

Her fair hair swept the bosom of the stream
That whispered with delight to be their pillow.

(363-66)

Shelley's imagery, often assumed to be incoherent and erratic, is instead extraordinarily systematic whenever light is being thematized. The passage condenses all that earlier and later poets (one can think of Valery and Gide's Narcissus, as well as of the Roman de la Rose or of Spenser) ever did with light, water, and mirrors. It also bears witness to the affinity of his imagination with that of Rousseau, who allowed the phantasm of language born rhapsodically out of an erotic well to tell its story before he took it all away. Shelley's treatment of the birth of light reveals all that is invested in the emblem of the rainbow. It represents the very possibility of cognition, even for processes of articulation so elementary that it would

be impossible to conceive of any principle of organization, however primitive, that would not be entirely dependent on its power. To efface it would be to take away the sun which, if it were to happen to this text, for example, would leave little else. And still, this light is allowed to exist in The Triumph of Life only under the most tenuous of conditions.

The frailty of the stance is represented in the supernatural delicacy which gives the shape "palms so tender / Their tread broke not the mirror of [the river's] billow" and which allows it to "glide along the river." The entire scene is set up as a barely imaginable balance between this gliding motion, which remains on one side of the watery surface and thus allows the specular image to come into being, and the contrary motion which, like Narcissus at the end of the mythical story, breaks through the surface of the mirror and disrupts the suspended fall of its own existence. As the ..passage develops; the story must run its course. The contradictory motions of "gliding" and "treading" which suspended gravity between rising and falling finally capsize. The "threading" sunrays become the "treading" of feet upon a surface which, in this text, does not stiffen into solidity. Shelley's poem insists on the hyperbolic lightness of the reflexive contact, since the reflecting surface is never allowed the smooth stasis that is necessary to the duplication of the image. The water is kept in constant motion: it is called a "billow" and the surface, although compared to a crystal, is roughened by the winds that give some degree of verisimilitude to the shape's gliding motion. By the end of the section, we have moved from "thread" to "tread" to "trample," in a movement of increased violence that erases the initial tenderness. There is no doubt that, when we again meet the shape (425 ff.) it is no longer gliding along the river but drowned, Ophelia-like, below the surface of the water. The violence is confirmed in the return of the rainbow, in the ensuing vision, as a rigid, stony arch said "fiercely [to extoll] the fortune" of the shape's defeat by what the poem calls "life."

This chain of metaphorical transformations can be understood, up to this point, without transposition into a vocabulary that would not be that of their own referents, not unlike the movement of the figure itself as it endeavors to glide incessantly along a surface which it tries to keep intact. Specifically, the figure of the rainbow is a figure of the unity of perception and cognition undisturbed by the possibly disruptive mediation of its own figuration. This is not surprising, since the underlying assumption of such a paraphrastic reading is itself one of specular understanding on which the text serves as a mirror of our own knowledge and our knowledge mirrors in its turn the text's signification. But we can only inadequately understand in this fashion why the shaped light of undertanding is itself allowed to wane away, layer by layer, until it is entirely forgotten and remains present only in the guise of an edifice that serves to celebrate and to perpetuate its oblivion. Nor can we understand the power that weighs down the seductive grace of figuration until it destroys itself, the figure of the sun, with all its chain of correlatives, should also be read in a non-phenomenal way, a necessity which is itself phenomenally represented in the dramatic tension of the text.

The transition from "gliding" to "trampling" passes, in the action that is being narrated, through the intermediate relay of "measure." The term actively reintroduces

music which, after having been stressed in the previous scene (354-55), is at first only present by analogy in this phase of the action (359-74). Measure is articulated sound, that is to say language. Language rather than music, in the traditional sense of harmony and melody. As melody, the "song" of the water and, by extension, the various sounds of nature, only provide a background that easily blends with the seduction of the natural world:

... all the place

Was filled with many sounds woven into one
Oblivious melody, confusing sense
Amid the gliding waves and shadows dun; . . .

(339-42)
As melody and harmony, song belongs to the same gliding motion that is interrupted only when the shape's feet

to the ceaseless song
Of leaves and winds and waves and birds and bees
And falling drops moved in a measure new. . . .

(375-77)

The "tread" of this dancer, which needs a ground to the extent that it carries the weight of gravity, is no longer melodious, but reduces music to the mere measure of repeated articulations. It singles out from music the accentual or tonal punctuation which is also present in spoken diction. The scene could be said to narrate the birth of music out of the spirit of language, since the determining property is an articulation distinctive of verbal sound prior to its signifying function. The thematization of language in The Triumph of Life occurs at this point, when "measure" separates from the phenomenal aspects of signification as a specular representation, and stresses instead the literal and material aspects of language. In the dramatic action of the narrative, measure disrupts the symmetry of cognition as representation (the figure of the rainbow, of the eye and of the sun). But since measure is any principle of linguistic organization, not only as rhyme and meter but as any syntactical or grammatical scansion, one can read "feet" not just as the poetic meter that is so conspicuously evident in the terza rima of the poem, but as any principle of signification. Yet it is precisely these "feet" which extinguish and bury the poetic and philosophical light.
It is tempting to interpret this event, the shape's "trampling" the fires of thought "into the dust of death" (388), certainly the most enigmatic moment in the poem, as the bifurcation between the semantic and the non-signifying, material properties of language. The various devices of articulation, from word to sentence formation (by means of grammar, syntax, accentuation, tone, etc.), which are made to convey

meaning, and these same articulations left to themselves, independently of ..their signifying constraints, do not necessarily determine each other. The latent polarity implied in all classical theories of the sign allows for the relative independence of the signifier and for its free play in relation to its signifying function. If, for instance, compelling rhyme schemes such as "billow," "willow," "pillow" or transformations such as "thread" to "tread" or "seed" to "deed" occur at crucial moments in the text, then the question arises whether these particularly meaningful movements or events are not being generated by random and superficial properties of the signifier rather than by the constraints of meaning. The obliteration of thought by "measure" would then have to be interpreted as the loss of semantic depth and its replacement by what Mallarme calls "le hasard infini des conjonctions" (Igitur).

But this is not the story, or not the entire story, told by The Triumph of Life. For the arbitrary element in the alignment between meaning and linguistic articulation does not by itself have the power to break down the specular structure which the text erects and then claims to dissolve. It does not account for the final phase of the Narcissus story, as the shape traverses the mirror and goes under, just as the stars are conquered by the sun at the beginning of the poem and the sun then conquered in its turn by the light of the Chariot of Life. The undoing of the representational and iconic function of figuration by the play of the signifier does not suffice to bring about the disfiguration which The Triumph of Life acts out or represents. For it is the alignment of a signification with any principle of linguistic articulation whatsoever, sensory or not, which constitutes the figure. The iconic, sensory or, if one wishes, the aesthetic moment is not constitutive of figuration. Figuration is the element in language that allows for the reiteration of meaning by substitution; the process is at least twofold and this plurality is naturally illustrated by optical icons of specularity. But the particular seduction of the figure is not necessarily that it creates an illusion of sensory pleasure, but that it creates an illusion of meaning. In Shelley's poem, the shape is a figure regardless of whether it appears as a figure of light (the rainbow) or of articulation in general (music as measure and language). The transition from pleasure to signification, from the aesthetic to the semiological dimension, is clearly marked in the passage, as one moves from the figure of the rainbow to that of the dance, from sight to measure. It marks the identification of the shape as the model of figuration in general. By taking this step beyond the traditional conceptions of figuration as modes of representation, as polarities of subject and object, of part and whole, of necessity and chance or of sun and eye, the way is prepared for the subsequent undoing and erasure of the figure. But the extension, which coincides with the passage from tropological models such as metaphor, synecdoche, metalepsis, or prosopopoeia (in which a phenomenal element, spatial or temporal, is necessarily involved) to tropes such as grammar and syntax (which function on the level of the letter without the intervention of an iconic factor) is not by itself capable of erasing the figure or, in the representational code of the text, of drowning the shape or trampling out throught. Another intervention, another aspect of language has to come into play.

The narrative sequence of Rousseau's encounter, as it unfolds from the apparition of the shape (343) to its replacement (434) by a "new vision," follows a motion framed

by two events that are acts oi power: the sun overcoming the light of the stars, the light of life overcoming the sun. The movement from a punctual action, determined in time by a violent act of power, to the gliding, suspended motion "of that shape which on the stream / Moved, as I moved along the wilderness" (425-26) is the same motion inherent in the title of the poem. As has been pointed out by several commentators, "triumph" designates the actual victory as well as the trionfo, the pageant that celebrates the outcome of the battle. The reading of the scene should allow for a more general interpretation of this contradictory motion.

We now understand the shape to be the figure for the figurality oi all signification. The specular structure of the scene as a visual plot oi light and water is not the determining factor but merely an illustration (hypotyposis) of a plural structure that involves natural entities only as principles of articulation among others. It follows that the figure is not naturally given or produced but that it is posited by an arbitrary act of language. The appearance and the waning of the light-shape, in spite oi the solar analogon, is not a natural event resulting from the mediated interaction of several powers, but a single, and therefore violent, act of power achieved by the positional power of language considered by and in itself: the sun masters the stars because it posits forms, just as "life" subsequently masters the sun because it posits, by inscription, the "track" of historical events. The positing power does not reside in Rousseau as subject; the mastery of the shape over Rousseau is never in question. He rises and bends at her command and his mind is passively trampled into dust without resistance. The positing power of language is both entirely arbitrary, in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it. It stands beyond the polarities of chance and determination and can therefore not be part of a temporal sequence of events. The sequence has to be punctured by acts that cannot be made a part of it. It cannot begin, for example, by telling us of the waning of the stars under the growing impact of the sun, .a natural motion which is the outcome of a mediation, but it must evoke the violent "springing forth" of a sun detached from all antecedents. Only retrospectively can this event be seen and misunderstood as a substitution and a beginning, as a dialectical relationship between day and night, or between two transcendental orders of being. The sun does not appear in conjunction with or in reaction to the night and the stars, but of its own unrelated power. The Triumph of Life differs entirely from such Promethean or titanic myths as Keats's Hyberion or even Paradise Lost which thrive on the agonistic pathos of dialectical battle. It is unimaginable that Shelley's non-epic, non-religious poem would begin by elegiacally or rebelliously evoking the tragic defeat of the former gods, the stars, at the hands of the sun. The text has no room for the tragedy of defeat or of victory among next-of-kin, or among gods and men. The previous occupants of the narrative space are expelled by decree, by the sheer power of utterance, and consequently at once forgotten. In the vocabulary of the poem, it occurs by imposition (1. 20), the emphatic mode of positing. This compresses the prosopopoeia of the personified sun, in the first lines of the poem, into a curiously absurd pseudo-description. The most continuous and gradual event in nature, the subtle gradations of the dawn, is collapsed into the brusque swiftness of a single moment:

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
. . . the Sun sprang forth . . .
and the mask

Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth.

The appearances, later in the poem, of the Chariot of Life are equally brusque and unmotivated. When they occur, they are not "descendants" of the sun, not the natural continuation of the original, positing gesture but positings in their own right. Unlike night following day, they always again have to be posited, which explains why they are repetitions and not beginnings.

How can a positional act, which relates to nothing that comes before or after, become inscribed in a sequential narrative? How does a speech act become a trope, a catachresis which then engenders in its turn the narrative sequence of an allegory? It can only be because we impose, in our turn, on the senseless power of positional language the authority of sense and of meaning. But this is radically inconsistent: language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood. Nor does the knowledge of this impossibility make it less impossible. This impossible position is precisely the figure, the trope, metaphor as a violent—and not as a dark—light, a deadly Apollo.

The imposition of meaning occurs in The Triumph of Life in the form of the questions that served as point of departure for the reading. It is as a questioning entity, standing within the pathos of its own indetermi-nation, that the human subject appears in the text, in the figures of the narrator who interrogates Rousseau and of Rousseau who interrogates the shape. But these figures do not coincide with the voice that narrates the poem in which they are represented; this voice does not question and does not share in their predicament. We can therefore not ask why it is that we, as subjects, choose to impose meaning, since we are ourselves defined by this very question. From the moment the subject thus asks, it has already foreclosed any alternative and has become the figural token of meaning, "Em Zeichen sind wir I Deutungslos . . ." (Holderlin). To question is to forget. Considered performatively, figuration (as question) performs the erasure of the positing power of language. In The Triumph of Life, this happens when a positional speech act is represented as what it resembles least of all, a sunrise.

To forget, in this poem, is by no means a passive process. In the Rousseau episode, things happen because the subject Rousseau keeps forgetting. In his earliest stages, he forgets the incoherence of a world in which events occur by sheer dint of a blind force, in the same way that the sun, in the opening lines, occurs by sheer imposition. The episode describes the emergence of an articulated language of cognition by the erasure, the forgetting of the events this language in fact performed. It culminates in the appearance of the shape, which is both a figure of specular self-knowledge, the figure of thought, but also a figure of "thought's empire over thought," of the element in thought that destroys thought in its attempt to forget its duplicity. For the initial

violence of position can only be half erased, since the erasure is accomplished by a device of language that never ceases to partake of the very violence against which it is directed. It seems to extend the instantaneousness of the act of positing over a series of transformations, but this duration is a fictitious state, in which "all . . . seemed as if it had been not" (385). The trampling gesture enacts the necessary recurrence of the initial violence: a figure of thought, the very light of cognition, obliterates thought. At its apparent beginning as well as at its apparent end, thought (i.e., figuration) forgets what it thinks and cannot do otherwise if it is to maintain itself. Each of the episodes forgets the knowledge achieved by the forgetting that precedes it, just as the instantaneous sunrise of the opening scene is at once covered over by a "strange trance" which allows the narrator to imagine the scene as something remembered even before it could take place. Positing "glimmers" into a glimmering knowledge that acts out the aporias of signification and of performance.

The repetitive erasures by which language performs the erasure of its own positions can be called disfiguration. The disfiguration of Rousseau is enacted in the text, in the scene of the root, and repeats itself in a more general mode in the disfiguration of the shape.

. . . The fair shape waned in the coming light
As veil by veil the silent splendour drops
From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite

Of sunrise ere it strike the mountain tops—

(412-15)

Lucifer, or metaphor, the bearer of light which carries over the light of the senses and of cognition from events and entities to their meaning, irrevocably loses the contour of its own face or shape. We see it happen when the figure first appears as water music, then as rainbow, then as measure, to finally sink away "below the watery floor" trampled to death by its own power. Unlike Lycidas, it is not resurrected in the guise of a star, but repeated on a level of literality which is not that of meaning but of actual events, called "Life" in Shelley's poem. But "Life" is as little the end of figuration as the sunrise was its beginning. For just as language is misrepresented as a natural event, life is just as falsely represented by the same light that emanates from the sun and that will have to engender its own rainbow and measure. Only that this light destroys its previous representation as the wolf destroys the deer. The process is endless, since the knowledge of the language's performative power is itself a figure in its own right and, as such, bound to repeat the disfiguration of metaphor as Shelley is bound to repeat the aberration of Rousseau in what appears to be a more violent mode. Which also implies, by the same token, that he is bound to forget him, just as, in all rigor, The Social Contract can be said to erase Julie from the canon of Rousseau's works, or The Triumph of Life can be said to reduce all of Shelley's previous work to nought.

The persistence of light imagery, in the description of the Chariot of Life as well as in the inaugural sunrise, creates the illusion of a continuity and makes the knowledge of

its interruption serve as a ruse to efface its actual occurrence. The poem is sheltered from the performance of disfiguration by the power of its negative knowledge. But this knowledge is powerless to prevent what now functions as the decisive textual articulation: its reduction to the status of a fragment brought about by the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley's body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned off the coast of Lerici. This defaced body is present in the margin of the last manuscript page and has become an inseparable part of the poem. At this point, figuration and cognition are actually interrupted by an event which shapes the text but which is not present in its represented or articulated meaning. It may seem a freak of chance to have a text thus molded by an actual occurence. Yet the circumstance exposes the wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts. If anything, this text is more rather than less typical than texts that have not been thus truncated. The rhythmical interruptions that mark off the successive episodes of the narrative are not new moments of cognition but literal events textually reinscribed by a delusive act of figuration or of forgetting.

In Shelley's absence, the task of thus reinscribing the disfiguration now devolves entirely on the reader. The final test of reading, in The Triumph of Life, depends on how one reads the textuality of this event, how one disposes of Shelley's body. The challenge that is in fact present in all texts and that The Triumph of Life identifies, thematizes, and thus tries to avoid in the most effective way possible, is here actually carried out as the sequence of symbolic interruptions is in its turn interrupted by an event that is no longer simply imaginary or symbolic. The apparent ease with which readers of The Triumph of Life have been able to dispose of this challenge demonstrates the inadequacy of our understanding of Shelley and, beyond him, of romanticism in general.

For what we have done with the dead Shelley, and with all the other dead bodies that appear in romantic literature—one thinks, among many others, of the "dead man" that " 'mid that beauteous scene / Of trees, and hills and water, bolt upright / Rose with his ghastly face; . . ." in Wordsworth's Prelude (V.470-72)—is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graves. They have been made into statues for the benefit of future archeologists "digging in the grounds for the new foundations" of their own monuments. They have been transformed into historical and aesthetic objects. There are various and subtle strategies, much too numerous to enumerate, to accomplish this.

Such monumentalization is by no means necessarily a naive or evasive gesture, and it certainly is not a gesture that anyone can pretend to avoid making. It does not have to be naive, since it does not have to be the repression of a self-threatening knowledge. Like The Triumph of Life, it can state the full power of this threat in all its negativity; the poem demonstrates that this rigor does not prevent Shelley from allegorizing his own negative assurance, thus awakening the suspicion that the negation is a Verneinung, an intended exorcism. And it is not avoidable, since the failure to exorcize the threat, even in the face of such evidence as the radical blockage that befalls this poem, becomes precisely the challenge to understanding that always again demands to be read. And to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat—that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead

are reincarnated, allowing us to apostrophize them in our turn. No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words. What would be naive is to believe that this strategy, which is not our strategy as subjects, since we are its product rather than its agent, can be a source of value and has to be celebrated or denounced accordingly.

Whenever this belief occurs—and it occurs all the time—it leads to a misreading that can and should be discarded, unlike the coercive "forgetting" that Shelley's poem analytically thematizes and that stands beyond good and evil. It would be of little use to enumerate and categorize the various forms and names which this belief takes on in our present critical and literary scene. It functions along monotonously predictable lines, by the historicization and the aesthetification of texts, as well as by their use, as in this essay, for the assertion of methodological claims made all the more pious by their denial of piety. Attempts to define, to understand, or to circumscribe romanticism in relation to ourselves and in relation to other literary movements are all part of this naive belief. The Triumph of Life warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence. It also warns us why and how these events then have to be reintegrated in a historical and aesthetic system of recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy. This process differs entirely from the recuperative and nihilistic allegories of hisroricism. If it is true and unavoidable that any reading is a monumentalization of sorts, the way in which Rousseau is read and disfigured in The Triumph of Life puts Shelley among the few readers who "guessed whose statue those fragments had composed." Reading as disfiguration, to the very extent that it resists historicism, turns out to be historically more reliable than the products of historical archeology. To monumentalize this observation into a method of reading would be to regress from the rigor exhibited by Shelley which is exemplary precisely because it refuses to be generalized into a system.